

SAVING IRAQ

I am standing in my kitchen when I see the two Marine officers in the olive-green car rounding the corner of my street . I grab my coat and run out the back door to the garage. I check my pocket for the car keys on my wallet.

On the car radio, I hear the news. There's a roadside bombing in Afghanistan. Genocide in Darfur. New attacks in Afghanistan. What's news ? President Bush says that we will do what is necessary; Iraq will be terror's devastating defeat.

I turn off the radio.

Seaside Park. Long Island Sound curls in slow motion along the Connecticut beach. Across the road on lush meadows, the students spin Frisbees. Their shouts flag the air. Workmen unpack black lunch pails. Some lie down under the great oaks.

People stride on the seawall. The weather has been cool and they are still dressed for winter. But they open their coats, remove their jackets. They don't know that the world has ended today.

A man on a bench feeds pigeons. They flutter down from trees; rise up from the meadows across the way. A seagull hovers in the air.

The seawall contains the swelling oceans that rises and breaks against the rocks. Rises and breaks.

At the far end of the beach, the wall collapses. When the tide is low, the lighthouse is accessible from the exposed sandbar. Children like to walk there. They feel as though they are walking across the ocean.

That time is Past but my pleas still linger,” It’s dangerous. You mustn’t do it, darling. The tide may turn before you know it.”

The sand lies careless as gray silk...

...and I see the children as they spring up in droves, dozens of them. Plump and fragile, running with their pails of water from the sea. They fill holes, pools, moats, until the sand is clay. They mold with their fists; they bury each other in sand dunes.

I see us, the mothers, lining the water’s edge in our webbed beach chairs, bulging from pregnancy or recent delivery, cooling our feet in the water.

“You rest, I’ll watch Tommy,” my neighbor says.

I am pregnant with my second child, endlessly nauseated, but I shake my head, how can I trust you, dear friend? God is watching. Can I trust Him?

Grief is a private room. Chattering, the world passes. I make life small, squeeze it tightly into a beach bag one sand-colored afternoon.

The beach is studded with garbage; bags sopping with peach juice, Popsicle sticks, broken sandals, cigarette stubs. The tide nips at the children’s heels.

They laugh, but we mothers rise as one, gathering towels, umbrellas. hats, infants...

“COME OUT OF THE WATER!” WE CRY.

My son, my first born, watches the water fill the moat around his fort.

“Come, Tommy, We’ve got to move back. The tide’s coming in”

The moat flattens and swirls. The water rises up the walls. He considers pushing back the ocean, but it too practical. He abandons his dream.

Sky, Earth, Water. Eternity.

I feel warm, remove my jacket, feel the weight of my wallet in the pocket as I fold it over my arm.

Two girls precede me. Their waists are small, their breast half- revealed. One has hair the color and shape of frozen custard. The other girl has red hair, her head is in flames. Their eyes are caves of color. Their green fingernails rake each other as they exaggerate a point, giggling. The girl with the white hair looks familiar.

The pigeon man dips his hand into a brown paper bag and reads a litany of crumbs; He waits for the girls to pass; for the pigeons to retreat; to return. I stand motionless. The birds settle on the back of his bench, at his feet, on his shoulders.

He puts a kernel of corn on his lips. A bird flutters to his face. Frightened at its own audacity, it flies to the arm of the bench. Another hangs in the air, then with a quick dart of its beak, extracts the corn. The man smiles. His lips are blue.

“Good afternoon,” he says

“Good afternoon.”

I am his witness and he feels kindly towards me. He moves over, making room on the bench.

“Sit down very slowly,” he whispers. Even as I obey, the birds back away.

They'll get used to you. They're not afraid of people because they're not afraid of me."

He pulls a smaller bag out of the larger one. It is filled with breadcrumbs. He keeps the corn for himself.

The pigeons are fat and drab. Squabs, Not like the pigeons my father raised on the roofs of the apartment houses when we lived in New York City. These he rebred to perfection with tiny crowns and feather boots. They were trained to land and take off from the runway he built on their pigeon cote. One by one up the blue sky in V formations...

I rise from the bench scattering the birds. The man rises with me.

"Is something wrong?"

I put my hands against my temples and press hard.

A giant hand has taken all the lovely things and re-arranged them so that here's my picture when I was sixteen and mother not and there's a tennis racquet that is dead.

And here's a cup who drank of, where a chair I sat but on the day and why

"Are you ill?" the man asks.

Not a pigeon is in sight

"I've frightened your friends."

"They'll come back."

They do. They straggle back from the rocks, fly down from the cloud where they trail the sea gulls, another sea gull dives. I see the sea gull pecking the pavement like a chicken,

“Go!” I shout. “Don’t beg for crumbs. You’re a fisher bird. You walk on water,”

The birds leap off in panic.

The man’s face crumples. “Now see what you’ve done.” He folds his paper bags under his arm and stalks away. I brush crumbs from my lap. Among the birds’ sooty feathers, are rainbows. I slip off my shoes

...and step over pebbles until I feel the relief of the wet sand against the scorched soles of my feet. If Tom didn’t carry all of the paraphernalia, I wouldn’t come to the beach. I’m pregnant again with my third, I hold my little girl’s hand, Tom helps me settle.

“Okay, Ma? Can I go now, Ma?”

“Please don’t nag, Yes, you can go in the water but you must tell me first,”

“Ma-a, I’m a Junior Lifesaver!”

“Yes you are, I’m not asking for your sake, I’m asking for mine,”

These are the years of birthing, the years I am stunned by the miraculousness of my function; senses interchange, I hear images, see fear, feel on my skin the longing of the uncreated.

I, the birthing woman, am fine-tuned by my body. Life is too important to be left to reason, it grows as child, future, immortality after our flame dies and neither flint no stone can return us.

I hear it in the night as the child lengthens in the bed, catches its breath after a dream.

I see it in Lisa as my Lisa flings herself into the water. Her hair wavers underwater like the fins of a fish. At last, she rises, dripping, little teeth exposed in a big smile. I breathe.

“You’re having a boy this time,” my friend says.

A boy. The nightly news. Jim Lehrer shows their faces.

I can’t bear Lisa ducking underwater anymore, “Come, build a sand castle with Mommy,” I call.

“You start it, Mommy.”

I consider how to bend.

“I’ll start it for her,” my friend, Cori, piles and sculpts the sand; Lisa falls on her knees and begins digging with both hands.

“Lucky, won’t you help Lisa?” I ask the other child.

Lucky sets her mouth.

Greta regards her daughter. “Look at you. Go in the water and wash yourself off.”

“You could bring some water back in your pail for the castle,” I am furious with Greta for the disgust in her voice.

“No.” Lucky says.

Friction has developed among us. We turn from each other and concern ourselves with our children. Tom swims to the shore, catches Lisa dipping her pail. He turns on his back spouting like a whale. Laughing, she throws the pail of water

on him. The whale pulls her into the ocean. Then he gets up and runs away from her. She tries to catch him. I'm showered with cold drops of water.

"Where's a towel, Ma?"

I hand him one. "Put your hands on my forehead, Tom."

They're cooling. The women smile at Tom. He's that kind of kid.

"Can I have some money?" He rescues my wallet from the sand." Would anyone like something from the Concession," I ask. Cory waits for Greta to answer. Then she refuses too.

"Just coffee." I watch my son's retreating back. A leaf has the same spinal markings, Sometimes I tease him. You're the one who did it. You turned me into a mother." The first-born. Medicine names her primapara. Until she gives birth she is medically virgin.

Sex can't compare to that primal force when it erupts. It has the pressure of a volcano, the convulsions of an earthquake. Again and again, it ploughs through the fragile body, merciless, relentless, until the bloom explodes and is born.

Tom returns. "Lisa wants a pop. I'll need more money, Mom."

Janice stands next to him, her body already a woman in miniature as a boy is rarely miniature of a man. His body is wholly boy until it becomes wholly man. She tosses her hair. She loves Tom.

Cori mouths, "Cute."

I produce more change. Janice follows Tom back to the beach house wriggling her hips like a puppy whose legs are too short.

“C’mon, kids, stop fighting.” Cori gets up to separate the two boys scuffling behind her. Her shoulder strap slips, she is pink and orange like a Renoir. “You each have a pail of your own.”

They settle down, Cori rummages in her beach bag and comes out with lollipops that have little faces on them. She hands them out.

“Do I have to eat mine?” asks Lisa.

“Not unless you want to.”

Lisa sticks hers into the castle and draws a circle around it.

At each cove, the sea changes. In one, it is a furious pony; spray flings from the rocks. In another it swirls like a matador’s cape. Here, I see the two girls, one of whom I know, leaning against the wall passing a joint between them. In the next cove, the sea ruffs gray water.

The sun is warm, the sea is cold, but I will not know it. I feel the waters drawing me, the horizon opening wide for me, all of nature reaching out to bring me to my boy, I follow...

Lisa, music plugged into her ears. My youngest child, Danny, races to the water’s edge, pretends to fall face forward, arms turning like propellers. Cori wears a beach hat since a tiny cancer was removed from between her eyebrow, Greta plays with her blue-eyed baby, the creamy-skinned son of her lover, She coos and laughs at him, She laughs at Cori too.

“Your sex life would be ruined if you didn’t go out on Saturday night.”

“ Why not? It’s the only time of the week we go out as a couple without the kids, We can talk to each other again.”

“Doesn’t it get routine?” Greta is marvelously in love, full of glory. Not for her the mundane comfort of the marriage bed, and here is her lover’s child taking her lover’s place at her breast. I know because she needs more than a confidante, she needs a witness in order to savor her triumph.

“Part of the fun is anticipation. Love has to be planned or it fizzles, I nap when the sitter comes on Saturday afternoon so I’ll be rested for my husband on Saturday night.”

“I wish I could.” I say.

“But you could, Jill,” Cori says earnestly.” You spend Saturday afternoon running with Greta and those other friends of yours to Bloomies or Saks.”

“I do? “ An unexpected image of myself.

I suppose I do. They make my choices for me. What do I know about designers and special buys? I want their approval. I want to be one of the crowd, even look like them; I believe that if I could want what they want, I would be fulfilled as they are fulfilled, I could have X’s wardrobe, Y’s house. I could cook like Cori; dabble in he arts like Greta.

In those afternoons I spent in Bloomingdale’s, I ordered Tom a madras shirt, a coffee pot for his apartment, socks...

“What do you hear from Tom?” Greta asks. And there he is in my mind, so far, so separate now that I feel an amputation Our lives are past performances. Tom, my son, is in the Service.

“Whatever made him pick the Marines?” Cori asks.

“The Marine recruiters went to UConn. Save the world, then you can start your life.”

I don’t say that I didn’t know about that.

“Well, I’d trust Tom’s decision.” Cori says, “He’s always been a sensible kid.”

We become aware of the lithe bodies of several youngsters watching Greta nurse her baby.

“Why don’t you kids play ball or something?” Cori asks.

“Let them look. It’s natural for goodness sake,”

Cori glowers until the kids saunter off, “I don’t want to encourage any unwanted grandchildren.”

.... Birth control assured, joints smoked. The two girls walk towards me. The one with the custard hair is Lucky, Greta’s daughter, grown up.

I wonder what they will leave here, these young women, of their bleached and painted selves. Here, where the wind abrades and the tide pulls our menstrual blood.

The two girls move coyly in the girlish-in-spite –of –themselves bodies.

Two young men appear. They are in uniform with wings pinned to their tunics.

...this picture album thing of terror and of pain, the thought of parties cooking little cabbages and stuffing them with love and how he loved them now are

tears, and little scraps of paper are enhanced and wings of heart that flew away
unopened like the letter if you live to read

Dear Mom It's a good deal after I graduate flight school get my wings I'll
have a house good pay Janice can come down we'll marry love you, Mom.

Dear Mom One time we were watching Grampa's pigeons fly and I asked
you why can't I you said men can do anything their minds conceive.

And Grampa said when he was still a boy he asked his father if I were a
pigeon could I fly to America. His father said you will, he did and that's why we...

Zoom! Up past the moon and Venus and Mars, I said, you said, you will, it
will happen...

to be opened only in the event of my

I have always admired the fitted closets in Bloomingdale's. I'm upstairs
putting away my linens, tying the sheets and towels with ribbons and placing
perfumed soaps in the fold.

I hear my sons downstairs. Tom says," Just because I can't be home for our
birthday, I'll give you a special treat now."

A pause. Danny says," You mean it?"

"I mean it."

"But Mom won't let me."

"She might not understand so we'll go out back where we won't hurt
anything."

The radio is turned loud. Let them have their secrets, I think, I tie ribbons around the fingertip towels.

Whine- I recognize a melody I danced to in high school.

CRACK! I run to the window. The two boys are standing in the backyard facing the hill. Tom has set a tin can on a rock half way up. Danny is pointing Tom's gun at the can.

CRACK!

Danny shakes with the recoil. A puff of dirt where the bullet hits. The can stands firm. Tom takes the gun, holds it at eye level, fires,

The can swoops up into the air, falls, bounces

Tumbles over and over down the

...two heads close together as brother explains to brother the intricacy of aim

CRACK!

...disconcerting when a young man your sons age come on to you.

One of them is admiring me. I frown not to encourage him. The girls watch sullenly. The young man approaches me. He holds out his hand." You dropped your wallet," he says.

"The wallet must have fallen out of your coat pocket. On your arm."

He is a beautiful young man with wings on his chest. Are all young men angels this year?

I say, "Thank you. Then, "Are you in the Air Force?"

The Marine Corps. I'm on leave "

Leave. Loaned.

Behind him, the others wait. Janice is not here. These two girls are warrior's women. The young lieutenant looks at them and hesitates, "Would you like to come with us?"

"My son is a flyer too," I say to let him know I'm too old for him."Oh," says the young man, "Where is he stationed?"

"I-don't remember." *why am I lying? "My son is a little boy."*

"Okay, if that's the way you feel about it."

"No, look..." I open my wallet show him a picture of...

...a little boy fretting, his body too warm. I pick him up from the crib and carry him to my bed. Why can't I be sick instead? At least, I would not have to bear two burdens, the child's illness, and the mothers panic. Oh yes it will be easier if I

The young man goes back to his companions. I feel an urgency rise in me. Have I left my child sick? I can't remember a baby sitter. I have forgotten Tom. Walked away and left him alone to wake frightened, to cry unheard. But where, where

...and this he saw and this he saw not and will not see and things that live not, are, and it is put back where it belongs a single piece of future that is past like vomit spilled nose wrinkled to wipe up

let it all stay and drop drop life from me that am leave stem bare

The sandbar is exposed almost to the lighthouse, and I fold my coat and leave it on the beach. How warm it is as I walk, how comfortable,

This is where I have come from, where life had come from. The great sea rocks, rocks, a mother singing her lullabies. It is no coincident that lullabies sing death, with roses bedight and lilies bedecked are baby's wee bed. Lay thee down now and rest, may thy slumber be

Yes, I saw the olive green car and the two uniformed officers coming with their yellow telegram. Yes, I hear the crash and the cry and only the sea will obliterate the flight. Yes, I see myself marching under the uplifted swords, as though behind a bridal couple, but my daughter-in-law is death. I see the flowers and the flag-draped coffin and I sit in the heat of the day, stone –cold, having abandoned my body and become what must live if it did not die that moment, a soul...

The bugle sounds. A day sharp as a knife cut through the wings that bore h is life, That day is done, Gone the sun.

The guns blast and my soul is shaken back into its proper garment which hurts since life is too small to hold the immensity it had envisioned.

Dead. *Tom is dead.* But the sea is warm and without grief, I welcome the tide. It will embrace the whole of me and I will be where he is. I slip off my shoes, I walk on the water, the sand dissolves under my feet. I slip to my knees. There is no demarcation between sky and water. A black moon floats in both. I hold out my arms to receive my mother's embrace. I will not get up from this water.

...and my child will be forgotten in the span that should have been his lifetime.

I look towards the shore. It's further than I thought, The pigeon man is waving his hat. The two young men in uniform are running.

The wind carries their shouts.

"Tom!" I cry trying to get up.

Who will be his memory, his witness?

"Tom!" He sees me watching him. He approaches slowly, afraid that I will panic, swim way from him. He is not Tom.

He will never forgive this moment if he does not save me,

But I don't hold my hand out to him. The tide is strong, I think about the tide pulling me and the moon pulling the tide and I see the young man tearing off his tunic and flinging it away into the surf. I see him plunging into the ocean and I smile and close my eyes.